Sustaining the Heart: Attracting Latino Families to Our Inner-City Catholic Schools
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Purpose Statement
The purpose of this action research project was to investigate Latino parents’ overall perceptions of Catholic school education within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dallas in order to devise an effective marketing plan to attract these families to our schools.

Research Questions
How do Latino parishioner parents view the importance of a Catholic school education?

How do Latino parishioner parents view the academic benefit of area Catholic schools?

If finances were not involved, what reservations do Latino parishioner parents have about their children attending Catholic school?

BACKGROUND
St. Mary of Carmel is an inner-city Catholic school that has been serving the Latino population of West Dallas for over 65 years. The school has capacity for 225 students, but enrollment has fluctuated between 120 and 185 students over the past 10 years. Never has the enrollment exceeded 200 students, and 171 children were enrolled for the 2009 – 2010 school year.

Throughout the last decade, the school has labored to meet the financial obligations of the school community. Once run by the Sisters of The Holy Spirit, almost every classroom was staffed by a vowed religious sister. That number has dwindled to the point where only one will be on staff for the 2010 – 2011 school year.

CURRENT STUDY
An original survey instrument and structured interviews were used in this mixed method study. Participants (N = 234) were 32 St. Mary of Carmel Catholic Church parishioner parents of public school students (10 male, 22 female); 86 St. Cecilia Catholic Church parishioner parents of public school students (8 male, 78 female); and 116 St. Augustine Catholic Church parishioner parents of public school students (11 male, 95 female).

METHOD
The primary analysis of data indicated strong agreement from parishioner parents that Catholic school education was better in discipline, morals, academics, and preparation for high school than area Dallas Independent School District (DISD) schools.

Additional analysis of the data showed that there was a difference in level of agreement between parents from different parishes regarding Catholic schools as the most effective ministry of the Church and preparation of our students for high school.

Ultimately, because Latino parishioner parents believe that Catholic schools are better academically than DISD schools and that Catholic schools are the most effective way to educate our children in the Catholic faith, there is a deep desire among Latino parishioner parents for their children to attend Catholic schools.

FINDINGS

| Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Number of Respondents, Parent Perspective on Catholic Schools |
|---------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Most Effective Ministry of the Church             | 3.18    | 0.65    | 209    |
| More Successful in Developing Students Faith than CCD | 3.12    | 0.67    | 201    |
| More Effective Discipline than DISD               | 2.95    | 0.74    | 204    |
| More Successful in Preparing Students for High School | 2.92    | 0.65    | 201    |
| Stronger Academics than DISD                      | 2.90    | 0.69    | 185    |

Note: Level of agreement was based on a Likert Scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree

DISCUSSION AND EXTENSION
St. Mary of Carmel’s staff and advisory council, in conjunction with our parish, will devise marketing and outreach programs to educate members of our parish and surrounding parishes, on the reality of Catholic education for their children.

The marketing and outreach program will include a Catholic school information session held at each parish to highlight the benefits of Catholic schools, a letter to all parish families describing tuition assistance programs available, and invitations to all families to spend a day in a classroom to see the difference.

Additionally, St. Mary of Carmel will work with local non-school parishes to educate their pastors on the benefits of Catholic schools and the availability of those schools to their parishioners. This effort will begin with a one-on-one meeting with each pastor whose parish is being served by St. Mary of Carmel Catholic School.